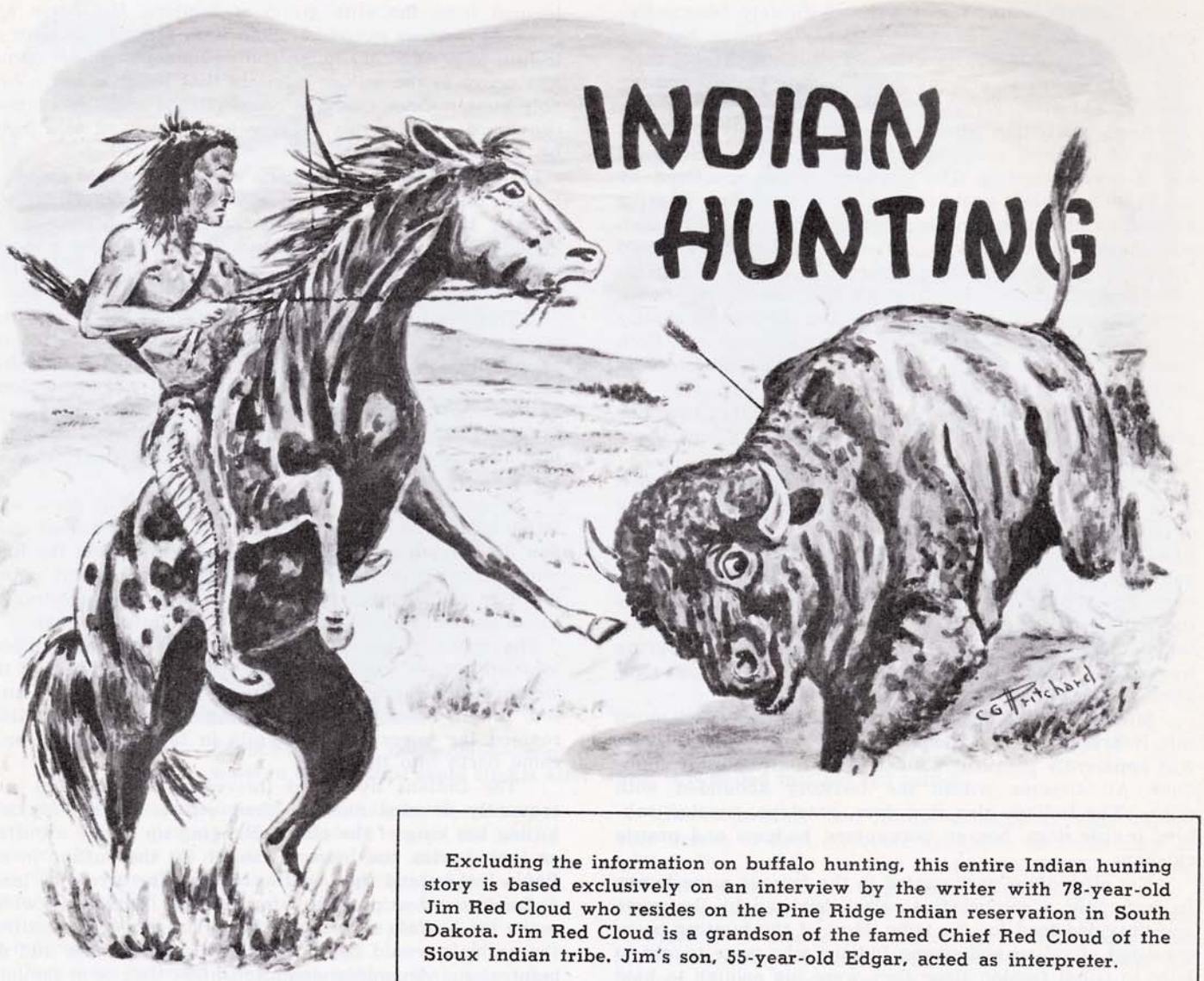
INDIAN HUNTING



Excluding the information on buffalo hunting, this entire Indian hunting story is based exclusively on an interview by the writer with 78-year-old Jim Red Cloud who resides on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota. Jim Red Cloud is a grandson of the famed Chief Red Cloud of the Sioux Indian tribe. Jim's son, 55-year-old Edgar, acted as interpreter.

Jim Red Cloud, center, relates methods of Indian hunting to Warden Leon Cunningham, right. Red Cloud's son Edgar does the interpreting.

by Dick Schaffer
Editor

THE COMING of the White man to the virgin prairies of the midwest was unwelcomed by the previously undisturbed Indians and often greeted with stern opposition. It meant competition for game and home. And—the presence of the Indians was likewise unappreciated by the pioneers who were continually searching for new frontiers. Though neither had any affection for the other and lost no love, they did eventually manage to adapt themselves to one another and succeeded in exchanging some ideas.

A present game law in Nebraska—and in many other states—is very similar to a law which governed the hunting activities of the Sioux Indians. Whether or not it can be traced to the Indian law is unknown, but it is known that the intent of the law was to discourage violations and to punish those guilty of infractions by seizure of some property.

According to Nebraska law, all guns used illegally shall be seized upon the arrest of the person so using them and upon conviction of such person for this act shall be

forfeited to the state. This law has definitely been influential in diminishing certain violations as many hunters, fully realizing the penalty of gun forfeiture, cherish their guns as their "pride and joy" and hesitate doing anything which might endanger their losing them.

And—the Indian tribal law as prescribed by the Sioux group of advisors undoubtedly discouraged and lessened out of season hunting. The advisory group, appointed by the reigning chief, established a law prohibiting hunting during the closed season. Any Indian found guilty of such an offense was dealt with severely. The advisors would first take one of the Indian's horses to replace the game killed out of season. Most Indians had two horses, one a good runner used in pursuing game and the other a stoutly built pack horse used in moving camping equipment. Both horses were their "pride and joy" and almost absolute necessity for survival.

The advisors, however, went one step farther than our present law. They killed one of the horses. Either horse would suffice.

The chief bestowed all hunting regulatory power upon the advisors in the Sioux tribe. They prohibited the killing of young game and prescribed usually two hunting seasons, the first being in May when grass was plentiful and game fat and good to eat; the second in the fall of the year. The start of the fall hunting season was signalled by the falling of leaves and continued until ample game was taken to carry the tribe over until the following spring hunt. They never killed an excessive amount of game inasmuch as game would keep only so long.

Most of the Sioux's hunting territory extended much into Nebraska and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Game was apparently plentiful with the king buffalo most abundant. All streams within the territory abounded with ducks. The Indians also shot deer, antelope, coyotes, rabbits, prairie dogs, beaver, porcupines, badgers and prairie chickens.

Not all Indians participated in the famous game hunts. In fact, only a comparative select few sought the game and provided food for the tribe. Most of the hunting party consisted of young and strong Indians who were taught to hunt in tribal fashion since they were big enough to hold a bow and arrow. The older Indians, however, possessed the better horses and bows and arrows and gave these to the young hunting party prior to their departure from camp. If ample game was sighted, there was no acceptable excuse for any of the learned hunting party to return without a kill.

During their youth, the younger Indians who were to eventually do the hunting for the entire tribe began practicing on rabbits and birds. They were taught how to hold the bow and arrow to achieve different distances. This practice consumed tremendous time.

In the larger villages, the group of advisors—when food was needed—would appoint two or more of their most skilled hunters to go out and seek game. They were under strict orders not to kill any game, but instead to scout for game and return and report their findings. If they saw a multitude of game, the entire hunting party would be sent on the hunt. However, if only small herds of game were sighted, only the most proficient hunter would be assigned the all-important job of killing the game.

When game was abundant and the entire hunting group sent out on the hunt, all were expected to be able to kill game and return to camp. However, if an Indian should fail, he would suffer tribal humiliation and be banned from the elite group of hunters. His horse and bows and arrows would be taken from him. It was then up to him to get another horse and equipment—on his own—and prove to the village advisors that he, too, was a capable hunter. Once this was accomplished and the advisors convinced of his ability, he was again received as a member of the hunting party.

Major weapon of the Indians was the bow and arrow. It is said that some great and powerful medicine man was told by the Great Spirit that the Indians should use an arrow-shaped rock to kill game. The Spirit also told the medicine man how the rocks could be sharpened and that they could be found in the hills.

This the Indians did and succeeded in achieving great accuracy and deadliness with the weapon. Not all of the arrows used by the Sioux were pointed. Different points were needed for killing the different species of game. Some arrows were blunt and rounded on the end. These were used for killing small game and were so shaped so not to mutilate the game. These arrows could be used on more than one occasion.

A sharp-pointed arrow was needed to kill game with tough hides. The stick part of the arrow was matured wood and the arrowhead pointed so it would penetrate the hide. Such arrows were utilized in killing badgers and porcupines. In killing bigger game such as deer and coyotes, the Sioux used flint rock shaped like the point of a spear.

The Sioux followed the game. They sought camping locations where they were safe from the extremities of the weather and where wood and water were abundant. Game, too, sought such locations. During summer, the Indians roamed the lower country while in fall they, like game, came north into the hills.

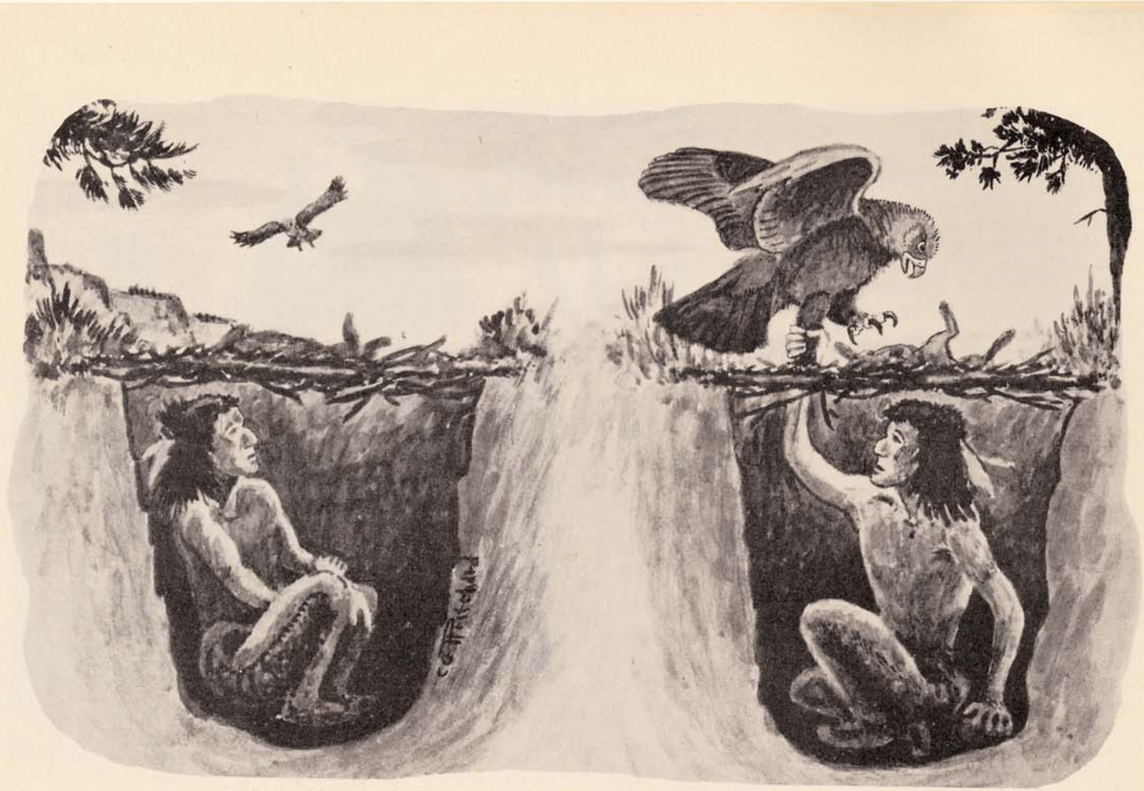
The Indians lived and thrived on buffalo and consequently devoted most of their efforts to tracking and killing the king of the plains. Ranging up beside a buffalo on their horses, the Indians tried to hit the buffalo in the flank, just behind the last rib, ranging the arrow or lance as far forward as possible into the lungs. Such a hit would make the buffalo slow down. If the lungs were punctured, the animals would begin foaming from the nose and die before long. An unintended hit in either the ribs or shoulder bones would merely irritate the animal which would often turn to fight, occasionally upending both Indian and horse.

Deer hunting was different. The medicine man, not the hunters, scouted for deer. If he spotted a herd, he would break off a limb from a nearby tree and stick it into the ground as a marker for the hunting group which would soon follow. Before returning to camp and reporting his findings, he would sing a song to the Great Spirit.

If possible, the marker stick would be placed near a high bank. The hunting party would create a big circle and work in toward the bank. The frightened deer would often fall over the bank, killing themselves. The others were easy shots for the in-closing Indians.

Another popular way of killing deer was the Sioux's "infiltration" hunt. They took the skin of a certain game animal that had horns and fastened the entire outfit over their body. They had previously taken gall from the scent glands of a fallen deer and smeared this all over themselves. With the horn-trimmed hide and scent of deer, the Sioux could actually infiltrate the herd. The rest was easy. They would pick out the heartiest deer and fire their arrows.

The Indian youngsters, too, had a pet way of killing deer. Finding an often traveled deer path, they would cut



Eagle hunting by the Indians—in pit dug on some high hill or slope. Indian waits in hiding until eagle alights after which it is pulled into pit and killed.

vines off of trees and unravel them, placing them across the path. Then, starting some distance away, the young boys would create all kinds of noise and drive the deer toward the vine-closed path. The frightened deer would unknowingly head toward the vines and become entangled briefly, permitting the young Indians ample time to shoot their arrows.

Deer were believed to be more wild at that time inasmuch as few humans were ever seen. Now, according to popular Indian belief, the deer are less afraid because man is a common sight.

The Sioux confined most of their antelope hunting to the period just before the sun crept over the horizon. Antelope were then feeding down in the flats and open country. The hunting party would split up, one group being stationed a considerable distance away and working toward the other group located at the foot of the badlands where the "spooked" antelope were expected to head.

Though most hunting required considerable time, it was the hunting of eagles that probably required the greatest patience and endurance of the Indians. They would locate a towering cliff or hill and dig a deep pit or hole near the top with the use of sharpened buffalo ribs. Having the pit completed, the Indians placed willow branches or other brush over the opening. A dead rabbit or deer—to serve as bait—was then placed atop the brush. One or two Indians would remain in the pit for three or four days and even longer until an eagle would be lured to the scene by the bait. As the eagle alighted, the Indians would grab it by the legs and pull it into the pit. A terrific battle then ensued with the Indians usually winding up as victors by ringing the eagle's neck.

Game—animals and birds—constituted the Indians only source of food with the exception of fruits such as wild Indian turnip, cherries, plums and buffalo berries. The hide of the animals also served as clothing.

Buffaloes were most in demand as almost every part of them were used in some fashion. Buffalo hides were cured and made into tepees. This was the assignment belonging to the women of the tribe who presented each newly married couple with a tepee. Buffalo hides were also used in the making of moccasins.

Even buffalo bones were utilized. The grease was removed from the bones and used in preserving food, in medicine and in a hair tonic. The head of the buffalo was skinned and dried in the sun. These were then used during the ceremonial worships. Prior to such ceremonies, the medicine man would go to some lofty hill where no other man was present. He would wrap a buffalo hide around his body and stand there for four days in a strict fast.

Deer hides received limited use, primarily by the feminine sex. They were tanned and used as summer garments by the women of the tribe.

The skin of skunks were dried and used for medicine bags while badger hides were dried and made into pouches to keep arrows. The Indians also made a kind of "tool box" from badger hides in which to keep their collection of various shaped arrowheads.

Beaver tails constituted a food item. They were removed from the animal and preserved with other meats. The beaver hide was made into little bags and satchels, one of which was used particularly for loose hair. The Sioux Indians had a superstition that should any of their hair fall on the ground, a snake might eat it and sickness

and sometimes death would fall upon the person who lost the hair. Whenever a big fire was made, the bag's contents of hair were burned.

Before any of the game could be consumed or used, however, the hunters would first have to provide the disabled Indians with an abundant supply. They could then take the remainder and use as they so chose.

Most of the meats were immediately processed for keeping over a period of several months. There were two popular methods of preserving meats. One was to cut the meat into very thin slices and dry it out or bake it in the sun. The meat was very carefully examined before being packed in the suitcase-like pouches made from buffalo hides. Pieces of meat were chipped off and tested. Unless they were perfectly dry, they were not packed in the pouches.

Another process of preserving meat was to pack dried cherries and bone marrow, pounded into small squares, alongside the meat in the pouches.

The Sioux Indians were successful in keeping flies and other insects from the meat while it was hanging out to dry. They would build a dry sage weed fire under the meat. The dry sage odor discouraged most insects.

The ways of the Indians began changing after 1825, the first year they came in contact with the White man. Guns began replacing the bow and arrow and salt, pepper and other spices became available for the first time. In 1851, the government began supplying the Indians with food rations consisting of such items as bacon, sugar, coffee and flour. The Indians, familiar only with their stable foods of meat and dried fruits, often threw the food away because they neither knew what they were or how to use them.

Yes, things have changed but the practices of the Indians will forever remain symbolic of the hunting prowress of the times.

Ray Scott of Lexington shot this 245-pound buck to set a new Nebraska record. His brother Wilford of Chadron offers assistance in lugging the deer aboard the truck.

Giant Beaver Once Lived

Thousands of years ago a giant beaver lived in North America. It was longer than a black bear. Counting its tail, it measured seven and one-half feet. The head was probably only four inches shorter than that of a lion. The modern beaver never stops growing, but doesn't grow fast enough nor live long enough to acquire any great stature.

This Gopher Has Pockets

The pocket gopher, found generally distributed throughout Nebraska, is named for its remarkable fur-lined pockets. These pockets, actually complete pouches, are placed one on each side of the head and neck. The openings are long slits in the skin under each jawbone. Lined with fine soft fur, they extend backward along the side of its head and neck as far as the shoulders. Using both hands so fast that the human eye can hardly follow them, the gopher inserts food or nest material in one pocket and then the other.

While pheasant hunting near the south edge of Sutherland reservoir, Don Fleets, Garold Fleers and Jack Chamberlain, left to right, all of Sutherland, shot this 22-pound bobcat. A number of bobcats were also reported shot during the deer season in northwest Nebraska.

Regulations To Be Ready

Printed copies of the new 1953 Nebraska Fishing Regulations should be available from permit vendors, conservation officers and the Lincoln office of the Nebraska Game Commission in early February at latest. The regulations were to be set at the Dec. 13 meeting of the Game Commission in Lincoln.

Nebraska Has 7 Parks

Nebraska has seven state parks, all of which are operated and maintained by the Game Commission. The parks are: Arbor Lodge (at Nebraska City on U.S. Highway 75), Chadron (9 miles south of Chadron on State Highway No. 19), Fort Kearny (10 miles southeast of Kearney on Highway No. 10), Niobrara (1 mile west of Niobrara on State Highway No. 12), Ponca (4 miles north of Ponca), Stolley (3 miles southwest of Grand Island) and Victoria Springs (8 miles north of Merna on State Highway No. 80).